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# Rebellion and Reconstruction, Galba to Domitian: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Book 64-67 (A.D. 68-96)

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## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Classics

## **Comments**

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**Reviewed by Cynthia Damon, Amherst College.**

Word count: 1832 words

This volume is the second to be published in an on-going collaborative effort, the Dio Project directed by P.M. Swan, which aims to produce a complete commentary on Dio for "students of history and historiography" (x). The previous volume, Meyer Reinhold's *From Republic to Principate*, also published by the APA's Editorial Board for Monographs, covered books 49-52 on the beginnings of the Augustan period (36-29 B.C.), where Dio's text survives entire. For the books discussed in the present volume we rely on epitome, excerpt, and the occasional quotation. Murison's initial assessment -- "strictly speaking, we have to admit that these books do not really exist" (1) -- is belied by the achievement that his commentary, building on the textual labors of Boissevain and others, represents: henceforth historians of the year of the four emperors and the Flavian period will feel that Dio's books 64-67 are more substantial than ever. And a good thing, too, since they cover a period over which our other sources grow progressively fewer: Plutarch disappears after Otho's suicide in 69, Tacitus' *Histories* break off before the capture of Jerusalem in 70, and Josephus's *BJ*, always limited in focus, has only cursory coverage of events after the Flavian triumph in 71. For most of the Flavian period there is, besides Dio, only Suetonius.

A helpful introduction opens the volume. The first sections orient the reader on topics basic to using the abbreviated and excerpted books of Dio's *Roman History*: the state of the text, the uncertainty of book divisions (and the consequent discrepant numbering systems in different editions, which are carefully explained by Murison [hereafter M.]), the probable proportion of the original in what survives. There follow sections on Dio's life ("the sum total [of what we know] is distinctly meagre," 6), and a chronology of composition for the 80 books of the *Roman History*, concluding that what we know as Books 1-76 were published c. 223 and received some revisions c. 223-29, with Books 77-80 and the revised books 1-76 published after the end of the Severan dynasty (235), perhaps posthumously. Dio's sources and the methodology of source criticism receive a sensible overview. The introduction ends with sections on genre, particularly on the interplay of imperial biography and annalistic history in Dio's work, and on reflections of events contemporary with Dio in the present narrative.

The commentary is primarily, but not exclusively, historical (for principal themes see

below). Lemmata and quotations from ancient texts are regularly translated into English. There is no text of Dio: one presumably uses either Boissevain (volume 3 of *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum Romanarum Quae Supersunt*, Berlin, 1901) or the more easily available Loeb edition of Earnest Cary (volume 8 of *Dio's Roman History*, Cambridge, Ma., 1925). Discussions of the ordering of the surviving pieces of the text are a regular feature of the notes (these are indexed), as are corrections to Cary's translation (these are listed here: 64.15.1<sup>2</sup>, 65.4.3, 65.11.4, 65.15.1, 65.17.2, 65.18.3, 66.16.3, 66.20.1, 66.24.1, 67.2.5, 67.3.3<sup>2</sup>). The book is meticulously produced: typographical errors are few and, but for one, insignificant (on 210 the reference to Statius *Silvae* 4.13-15 is obviously garbled and should probably be corrected to 3.4.73-75).<sup>1</sup> The book is also enlivened by the occasional touch of dry humor, as, for example, in the comment on the unsavory Neronian leftover, Tigellinus: "perhaps he hoped to be allowed to live out the remainder of his life in quiet depravity" (38), or in that on Domitian's talent for skewering flies with a stylus: "Anyone who has ever tried to do this ... " (150). The end materials include six maps, all well-tailored to needs of the narrative, and four indices, on disputed readings, discussions of passages from other sources, Greek words, and persons, places, and institutions. The work is clearly a labor of love (though not, I hasten to add, love of Dio: see below on Dio's style), or rather, perhaps, of *pietas*: it is dedicated to "MW," an abbreviation indispensable to those who work on the period, of which the letters represent M.'s Cambridge tutor and director of studies (xiii).

As in any commentary, so here certain topics receive special attention. Chronology is a subject congenial to both Dio and M., though in different ways. Dio regularly marks the end of a reign with calculations of the span of the deceased emperor's life and reign (Galba: 64.6.5<sup>2</sup>, Otho: 64.15.2, Vitellius: 65.22.1, Vespasian: 66.17-3-5, Domitian: 67.18.2; nothing comparable on Titus); these data are shaken and sifted and sorted here to yield their maximum of useful information. M. also elicits from a somewhat recalcitrant tradition, which includes Dio, the chronology of various journeys and military campaigns (see, e.g., 64.3.1 on the date of Galba's arrival in Rome, 65.11.4 on the second battle of Bedriacum, 65.14.3 on Otho at Brixellum, 66.8.1 and 66.9.2<sup>a</sup> on Vespasian's journey from Alexandria to Rome).

As further help for historians M. provides, where the remarks of Dio (or his epitomator) are vague or general or erroneous, details gleaned from the parallel tradition. There are also useful notes drawing on a wide range of material from outside the historiographical tradition, such as the republican character of the executions carried out by Galba (64.3.4<sup>1</sup>), the approximate cost of constructing the *via Domitiana* (67.14.1), and the timing and appearance of eclipses of the moon (65.11.1-2). Coverage is generally excellent, though some of the "old chestnuts" are approached rather wearily (e.g. Vespasian's financial exactions (66.2.5), the ban on cooked foodstuffs (66.10.3), the startling "black dinner" (67.9.1-5, note 240 "the details of the story are generally clear and require little comment"), the identity of "Maternus the sophist" (67.12.5), the possibility that Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla were condemned as Christians (67.14.2)); on these the assistance is primarily bibliographical.

M. also undertakes to critique the details and analysis that were Dio's own contribution to the narrative: the range of comment runs from "impressionistic" (65.16.4-5) to "improbable" (65.12.4, 67.10.1) to "highly dramatic [but] probably incorrect" (64.5.2, 65.18.2) to "fantasy" (65.13.3, 66.10.5).

M.'s thoroughness in thinking through historical questions occasionally involves him in speculations where one is loath to join him -- disease seems to be a particular area of interest (65.2.2 on Vitellius' bulimia, 66.17.1 on Vespasian's dysentery, 66.19.3<sup>c</sup> on the psychology of the false Nero, 66.26.2 on Titus' illness and depression, 67.3.2 on Julia's cervical cancer, 67.4.5 and 67.11.6 on food poisoning) -- but these are clearly marked (e.g., 202, "further speculation is pointless, but tempting ... ") and harmless enough.

M. is also attentive to evidence of Dio's historiographical method and of the practices of the various epitomators and excerptors through whom the text of these books reaches us. M.'s approach to the question of Dio's sources is introduced with a welcome critique of some of the principal arguments in the debate, those of Townend: "detailed, complex, and, above all, supremely self-confident" (16). In general he is duly skeptical of our ability to achieve a precise attribution of specific details to individual sources. There are notes on Dio's policy of recording (and thereby rewarding) deeds of distinction (64.6.5<sup>1</sup>), on the speeches (64.13.2, a particularly useful note with its analysis of the differences between the speeches composed for Otho by Dio, Suetonius, and Tacitus), on Dio's "improvements" on chronology (67.16.3: Dio's arrangement is "more impressive and eerier"), his apology for seemingly trivial material (66.9.4), his habit of generalizing from singular occurrences (66.9.4, 67.1.4), his moralizing (65.1.2), and his rhetorical style (see below).

In an historical commentary on a text that survives only in excerpt and epitome one will not expect much attention to style per se. However, rhetorical elaboration seems to have been one of the factors that attracted the attention of those who were drawing material from Dio's history (xiii), so much of what does survive is stylistically rich, not to say overdone. Which M. does say, repeatedly: the narrative of the days preceding Vitellius' fall is "a somewhat over-written and generalised mood piece" (110), the account of his death has an "overblown, rhetorical style" (118), Dio's account of Agricola's death is "a highly overwrought summary" (187), and so on. In this last case, at least, the stylistic label that M. applies to an admittedly unsatisfactory passage seems undeserved; the lemma is simply "Agricola ... was finally murdered" (66.20.3). M.'s stylistic comments are more useful when, as at 67.4.1, 67.7.4, 67.12.5 (all on Domitian), he analyses Dio's denigratory technique.<sup>2</sup>

Besides commenting on Dio's methods as an historian M. frequently points out passages where the epitomators and excerptors themselves come into focus. Details such as these are particularly helpful, but they are not indexed, so I give a generous sampling here.

Rome's wars were of interest to the epitomators, particularly the wars of Domitian's reign (124), but the Batavian insurrection and the *imperium Galliarum* were not (66.3.1), nor were details of individual battles (64.10.2<sup>a</sup>). Speeches survive even in the epitome (see pp. 66-68), and Dio's own authorial comments are reproduced verbatim in both epitome and excerpt (65.1.2, 66.8.7). But such authorial comment is not necessarily correctly contextualized: in the note on 65.2.1 we see that what in other sources is a criticism of Vitellius' becoming pontifex maximus on the *dies Alliensis* ("so ignorant of matters human and divine was he that ... ") has become a general critique of the emperor's morals ("he paid no heed to matters either human or divine"). Overlaps between epitome and excerpt receive comment in the notes on 66.9.2<sup>a</sup>, 66.12.2, 66.13.1<sup>a</sup>, and 67.3.3<sup>2</sup>. In the note on 67.7.2 we are introduced to an "epitomated excerpt." At 67.15.6 there is a useful note on an overlap between the two epitomators, which "reassures us about Xiphilinus'

preservation of Dio's essential information." On 64.2.3, on the other hand, M. shows how "major pruning by the epitomator" yields an historical *non sequitur*; a less serious but still visible omission is illustrated at 65.16.1. Epitomator error is corrected at 65.9.3 (on Antonius Primus) and 66.20.3 (on Agricola's triumphal honors). On 67.3.3<sup>2</sup> M. suggests that the epitomator's failure to understand the procedure in the first trial of the Vestals explains a peculiar expression.

No review would be complete without a little grouching on matters editorial. Such is the care that went into the present volume that the reviewer's scope is distinctly limited. I will say, however, that I wish editorial policy had demanded that references to ancient authors, if given, be accompanied by the text. There are too many teasing "cf."s like this one on Demetrius the Cynic: "he was ... a man of somewhat perverse temperament (cf. *Hist.* 4.40.3)," a verdict that one will seek in Tacitus in vain (Tacitus's verdict is *ambitiosius quam honestius*).

Such teasers, however, detract but little from this substantial work of scholarship on Dio Books 64-67 and on the history of the chaotic year 68 and the Flavian period. The previous complete commentary on Dio was published some 250 years ago (H. S. Reimar, 1750-52; see ix-x); the present volume makes a fair bid to last well, too.

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#### Notes:

1. Confusion may also arise from the reference to the dinner-table murder of Claudius by Nero at 66.17.1 (cf. Suet. *Ner.* 33.1 *non auctor* (sc. *Nero*) *at conscius*, and Tac. *Ann.* 12.66-67, which implicates only Agrippina).

2. A comment on language would, however, have been welcome at 65.13.4-5, on the highly Christian-sounding language of the Vitellian fraternizers at the second battle of Bedriacum.

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